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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001163

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: EMBASSY DELEGATION MEETS WITH SAUDI HUMAN RIGHTS
GROUP : USG URGED TO RESPECT THE "ARAB MINDSET"

Classified By: Charge' d' Affaires Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4(b)
and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Embassy POLOFFs met with Dr. Muftah Al-Kahtani, the Vice President of the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) on July 21. We received a briefing by Al-Kahtani on the NSHR, including the role it plays between citizens lodging human rights complaints and the SAG, as well as its view on USG human rights policy and procedures in the USG, which was negative. There was particular criticism of the Congressionally-mandated International Religious Freedom and Human Rights Reports. Topics discussed also included continued detentions at Guantanamo Bay and religious freedom.
END SUMMARY

RESPECT THE "ARAB MINDSET"

¶2. (C) Al-Kahtani stated that one of the goals of the NSHR was to "change the perception that a human rights agenda is the West pushing its own views on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." He was adamant in asserting that "all Muslims have to respect human rights as it is a part of our faith,⁸ but that it must be done in the Kingdom in an "Islamic context." Al-Kahtani was firm in defending the accomplishments of the NSHR, such as publications on prisoners, rights. He asserted that the reason for the "success" is that the NSHR is not forcing certain moral precepts on the people, but rather works within the Arab mindset, with methods organically drawn from Islamic law.

GUANTANAMO: USG "SETTING BAD EXAMPLE"

¶3. (C) Al-Kahtani stated that the USG is an "example for human rights and freedom," but the continued detentions at Guantanamo are not only human rights violations but damaging the legitimacy of the USG to pursue a human rights agenda. Al-Kahtani also added USG support of Israel as evidence that we "did not truly support human rights." He opined that Guantanamo Bay detentions "foster hate," and can actually lead to future terrorism.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: "IMPROVING," BUT STILL NO CHURCHES

¶4. (C) Al-Kahtani showed a keen knowledge of the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report. He stated that the IRF Report tends to "criticize Saudi Arabia without noting the positive developments." Al-Kahtani stated continuously that the purpose of the human rights report (HRR) and IRF Report is important, but that the method of

implementation is wrong. He also stated that Embassy Riyadh should contact his office regarding violations of religious freedom, so that he may "work to correct the situation."

¶15. (C) When asked about the possibility of non-Muslim places of worship in Saudi Arabia, such as churches, Al-Kahtani stated quickly that there are no mosques allowed in the Vatican," implying that discrimination against certain religious groups is not unique to the Kingdom. He then explained that all citizens of Saudi Arabia are Muslims, and all non-Muslims in the Kingdom are simply "temporary" residents. He stated, in quite confusing and contradictory logic, that because of this, non-Muslim residents, such as Christians, are only in the Kingdom "temporarily." Hence if churches are going to be built, there would be "no one to take care of them when the temporary residents leave." Al-Kahtani seemed very sincere in making this argument, despite its dubious nature.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) COMMENT. Al-Kahtani seemed more interested in stating his own views on sensitive USG policies rather than listening to the often less-publicized reasoning behind such controversies, such as detentions in Guantanamo Bay. Even so, it became clear that Al-Kahtani took issue not with USG human rights policy, but rather procedure. This reflects the acute Saudi sensitivity to criticism of their society and internal policy, which many Saudis view as sacrosanct. His argument justifying the absence of churches in Saudi Arabia

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was extremely illogical. There are millions of non-Muslims living (and working) in the Kingdom, with many residing here for decades with their entire families. Entire sub-societies of ex-patriots composed of east Asians, westerners, and Hindu South Asians are settled in Saudi Arabia, with many permanent societal structures firmly established. The reasoning that non-Muslim houses of worship would fall into disuse because the original members would ultimately depart ignores the long-term nature of the large third-country populations here.

¶17. (C) While Al-Kahtani responded with some useful information on the specific human rights cases we inquired about, it became clear that Al-Kahtani's vision for the NSHR was not necessarily working just for human rights within the Kingdom, but also for what he defined as his view of human rights issues around the world. His explicitly raising continued detentions in Guantanamo Bay and USG support of Israel was less sincere constructive criticism, but rather a way to deflect attention from the actual human rights issues that persist in the Kingdom. That Al-Kahtani so vociferously raised the Congressionally-mandated IRF and HRR reports reflects how sensitive the Saudis are to these types of external criticism. In an indirect and perhaps unintended fashion, his criticism was a tribute to the reports' effectiveness in highlighting human rights to religious freedom shortcomings in the Kingdom. END COMMENT.
GFOELLER